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Teacher Center Brookline — A Local Approach to Professional Development

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On an upstairs balcony in the administration building of the Brookline Public Schools, the Brookline Teacher Center consists of two small but cozy and efficient areas set up for teacher use, including an essential sink and counter where coffee pot and tea bags are always ready. One area has a couple of tables for work space, a woodwork bench, a variety of power and hand tools, sheets of tri-wall, scraps of wood, two walls of labeled bins containing quantities of materials for making games and classroom materials, all kinds and sizes of paper and cardboard, a good paper cutter, a laminating machine, plastic pockets on the wall with clear directions for anything from how to make paper or terrariums to where to go around Boston for special supplies or educational events. In addition, there is usually a beautiful display to accompany a current workshop -- a large table arranged like a harvest feast with small baskets containing an amazing array of seeds and dried berries to string into necklaces, or to study as an artistic nature collection; a borrowed selection of teacher-made math and reading games complete with directions on how to play them; a wall hung with samples of hand spun wool, dyed to warm shades of brown (from black walnuts), or yellow (marigold heads) along with small woven bags made on simple cardboard looms. Here there are always people making something for their classrooms or learning a new skill which will probably be incorporated into classroom projects.

In another area, there are racks with books and magazines, to be read there or signed out, on a large range of topics of interest to teachers. The Harvard Educational Review takes its place alongside the newest book on pioneer crafts, or a current article by a well known psychiatrist on the value of fairy tales in children's development. There is also a typewriter, a sewing machine, patterns for making storage pockets for printed materials, and often a slide projector for

sharing pictures of trips or classroom experiences. At the round table in here, small groups can meet for a discussion, seminar, or just informal exchanges. In this way a meeting can be held at the same time that a scheduled workshop is proceeding in the other area.

A look at the monthly schedule of the Teacher Center gives some indication of the variety of ways in which needs of teachers are considered. One month's events included a seminar on children's books, convened by a classroom teacher and two language arts specialists, where teachers grades three to five came to share favorite books towards the start of an annotated bibliography; workshops on making paper from recycled scraps; a folk song session for anyone who likes to play or sing; a workshop by two teachers on making reading games; the third meeting of a seminar on Life Planning for Teachers, prepared by two teachers and a psychologist; a workshop on making materials for hand printing in the classroom, taught by the Center's Resource Teacher. Other scheduled sessions have included workshops on Ecology, Record Keeping, a science unit on Pond Life, Calligraphy, Theater Games, Graphing, Teacher's Journals, Classroom Storage, Brookline Bicentennial, Photography in the Classroom, and many other subjects reflecting the large range of interests and concerns of teachers. Starting with stated requests from teachers, a program committee plans each month's schedule, taking into account the variety of needs and the availability of people to prepare and run workshops. Teachers volunteer their services and generally spend one session or more before a workshop discussing their plans with the Resource Teacher and gathering materials. Organizing and running a workshop can be as much a pleasure and learning experience as attending one, and the atmosphere is always informal in a spirit of sharing.

The special appeal of the Teacher Center to the more than 230 teachers and administrators who used it during its first year may lie in the way it came into existence. An offshoot of a course called Support Group in Open Education given by and for Brookline teachers several years ago, the Center was conceived by a small group of teachers who felt the need for a

place in the school community where teachers could meet, learn from each other, share skills, and help each other grow as teachers and individuals. A Teacher Center would be a concrete way to overcome teacher isolation by providing a means for teacher support in the classroom across grade level or school lines. Moreover, teachers would be able to discover their own needs in learning so that they could make plans for meeting these needs, while at the same time sharing their skills with other teachers. With their goal firmly in mind, the advocates of a Teacher Center received the support of the School Superintendent, Dr. Robert I. Sperber, and funding from the Brookline Teacher and Administrators Training Fund, supplemented by contributions from the Directors of Instruction and School Principals and the Massachusetts Teachers Association. After a summer of hard work, they found a place for the Center, ordered equipment such as tools and books, interviewed and hired a half time Resource Teacher and set up the space. The Teacher Center Brookline opened in February 1975 with a party attended by about one hundred teachers and administrators. The facilities of the Center and services of its Resource Teacher were made available to Brookline staff members every school day afternoon between 1:30 and 5:30. As recorded in its daily log, the Center was used during the first year by staff members, student teachers and occasional visitors a total of 870 times, and offered 70 workshops on 47 subjects.

While it took some time for teachers to become aware of the Teacher Center at the beginning, it was not long before people realized that it had something to offer them. Considering that all visits to the Teacher Center are voluntary on the part of teachers who already carry a very heavy load of after-school meetings and responsibilities, the first year attendance figures are really quite remarkable. But beyond the evidence of statistics, the personal responses to the Teacher Center can be conveyed by some representative comments taken from evaluation sheets that were distributed to all staff members:

I still think the Teacher Center is the best thing that's ever happened in Brookline in

support of teachers and teacher sharing. As far as I know, it's unique in its conception, development, and practice.

It has been a place to relax in and gain new energy for new projects. I have met teachers there, and informally we have been able to exchange ideas about curriculum, room design, discipline. The workshops have been wonderful -- relaxing and stimulating.

For principals, the Teacher Center is of real help through consultations about problems of space, teacher training, etc.

I think the Teacher Center is a stimulus for us all to act upon the theory that one never stops learning and growing, needing others, being able to share with others.

Best of all, the influence of the Teacher Center can be seen in the classrooms in Brookline. Children as young as kindergarten age are learning to bind their own books of beginning writing, or spinning their own yarn and weaving it to gain some understanding of Colonial life. Other children are gathering and classifying huge seed collections, or recycling classroom paper scraps into beautiful paper on which to write their own poems in their best calligraphy. In many classrooms children are learning math and reading skills through games made at the Teacher Center, or building and using primitive tools in connection with Social Studies lessons. The children themselves have become aware of their teacher's enthusiasm and often ask about Teacher Center workshops as they admire the new skills that are brought to their studies.

The evident success of the Brookline Teacher Center and its continued operation depend not only on the enthusiasm of staff members but also on the continuing work of its administrators, a board of Governors consisting of the Resource Teacher and representatives from all the schools, Directors of Instruction and Principals. The Board of Governors which meets once a month is the policy-making body of

the Teacher Center, aided by three standing committees: Administrative, Program, and Evaluation and Funding. During the first year, the role of the Resource Teacher developed gradually as the needs of teachers emerged more clearly. From the original expectation that a Resource Teacher would take care of materials, books, tools, mailing, and other administrative details, the role has become more complex. While an important part of the role does entail the administration of the Center's record keeping, ordering, monthly calendars, and organization of materials and physical environment, it also involves teaching workshops and seminars, supporting connections between teachers, providing consultations for individual teachers on problems of curriculum, space, and learning environment, producing booklets, posters, displays, and follow-up files. Less concretely, the Resource Teacher by her continual presence and availability contributes to the atmosphere of the Center as a welcoming, stimulating, relaxing place in which to learn. The Brookline Teacher Center was fortunate in finding a remarkably skilled person, Muffy Paradise, to help evolve this role. A former classroom and art teacher, Muffy works with teachers as a sensitive and thoughtful teacher does with children. As one teacher noted in the evaluation form, "The Teacher Center is the first place where I feel I can come away with a product, the where-with-all to carry it through myself, and the confidence that Muffy will always avail herself and her materials to me for my assistance."

While there is no question that the Teacher Center has established itself as a unique and valuable contribution to teacher education in Brookline, its development is, of course, not entirely free of problems. The most pressing problem is that of funding. The sources of funding that have been found so far require either yearly requests and formal approval or new efforts each year to solicit contributions. This leaves the Teacher Center uncertain about whether it will be funded again, and if so, what the amount will be. It seems necessary to find a more permanent and dependable source of funding, so that the energies of the Board of Governors and Resource Teacher can be turned entirely to program rather than fund raising.

Once the funding problems are solved, the Teacher Center can concentrate on other issues. Continual reassessments of programs and plans have surfaced such concerns as whether there should be more courses in depth rather than one-shot workshops, and whether there should be recruiting efforts to pull in greater numbers of people rather than relying as before on a gradual process of reaching smaller groups of teachers at a point where they feel their own needs. At every Teacher Center Board meeting such concerns are taken up, along with reports of new programs at the Center. There is no complacency among those responsible for the operation of the Teacher Center. Optimistic enthusiasm is tempered with thoughtful care to remain open to suggestion and change.

Visitors to the Brookline Teacher Center respond warmly to its ambience and usually return, but it's hard to describe what the experience can mean. Underneath the easy atmosphere, the casual talk, the joking, and the friendly contacts between teachers who might otherwise never have met, there is perhaps a much deeper level of involvement. This goes beyond the gaining of skills for the classroom, beyond the pleasure of sharing ideas, beyond the comfort or encouragement and social encounters. For some of the teachers in touch with the Teacher Center, the contact has meant the opening of a new world -- deeper ways of seeing, of thinking about children, of feeling related to the earth, of reaching out to other people. The Brookline Teacher Center is providing staff development in its most profound sense -- the impetus toward change and growth.